

MARCH 09, 2010

HHMI's Gilliam Fellowships Aim to Increase Diversity in the Sciences

The Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) has selected five exceptional individuals to receive the 2010 Gilliam Fellowships for Advanced Study. These students will join a dynamic group of 30 Gilliam fellows, who share a passion for science and a commitment to increasing diversity in the sciences.

"It's been very gratifying to see the impact of the Gilliam fellows program," says Peter J. Bruns, HHMI's vice president for grants and special programs. "In some ways, this is a special year for the program because we anticipate that some of the first Gilliam fellows will receive their Ph.D. degrees this spring."

The Gilliam fellows program aims to enrich science research and increase the diversity of college and university faculty members. Fellows, who come from groups underrepresented in the sciences or from disadvantaged backgrounds, have worked in the labs of top HHMI scientists as undergraduates and are committed to pursuing a doctoral degree in science.

HHMI established the fellowships in 2004 in honor of the late James H. Gilliam Jr., a charter Trustee of the Institute who spent his life nurturing excellence and diversity in education and science. Each Gilliam fellow receives \$44,000 in graduate school support annually for up to five years to help move them toward a career in science research and teaching.

Prior to being named Gilliam fellows, each student participated in HHMI's Exceptional Research Opportunities Program (EXROP), an initiative that nurtures the scientific curiosity, imagination, and dreams of some of this nation's most talented aspiring scientists. This program is open to high-achieving undergraduate students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds or groups traditionally underrepresented in the sciences. The students are nominated by colleges and universities that receive HHMI education grants. Since 2003, the EXROP Program has placed 359 students from 97 colleges and universities in the labs of 130 researchers. Of the students who have finished their baccalaureate degree, 93 percent are still in science, either teaching, working in a research lab, or pursuing an advanced degree.

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Alumni of EXROP are eligible to apply for Gilliam fellowships. Four of the five new fellows are currently applying to Ph.D. granting programs, while the fifth student is already enrolled in an M.D./Ph.D. program. "This program is providing opportunities to an outstanding group of highly talented individuals who have a demonstrated interest in and aptitude for research," says William R. Galey, who oversees the Gilliam program as HHMI's director for graduate and medical education programs.

The five new Gilliam fellows, chosen from 26 applicants, came to science from different paths, and their scientific interests are just as diverse. For example,

* After his grandmother died of liver cancer, Carleton College graduate Flavian Brown decided to devote his career to cancer research. Not only has Brown committed to working long hours in the lab, he's also dedicated to helping students who, like him, need just a few opportunities and a few good role models to thrive.

* Silvia N. Kariuki, a graduate of the University of Chicago, became interested in science watching her parents work to eradicate the parasitic disease schistosomiasis in her native Kenya. She has decided to study systemic lupus erythematosus, a chronic autoimmune disease that affects millions of people worldwide.

Part of what makes the EXROP and Gilliam programs unique is the opportunity for students from traditionally underrepresented groups to meet other students who are following the same scientific path. Each spring, EXROP and Gilliam students come together and present their research at HHMI headquarters in Chevy Chase, Maryland. The goal is to create a support network of scientists at all career stages who can help students feel comfortable in research and academia, Bruns says. "We choose these students not only for their potential as scientists but also for their potential as leaders who are concerned about diversity."

The winners of the 2010 Gilliam Fellowships for Advanced Study are:

Flavian D. Brown Carleton College

Mariam El-Ashmawy The University of Texas Southwestern Medical
Center at Dallas*

Rachel A. Johnston New Mexico State University

Silvia N. Kariuki The University of Chicago

Lisandro Maya-Ramos University of California, San Diego

*Graduate School